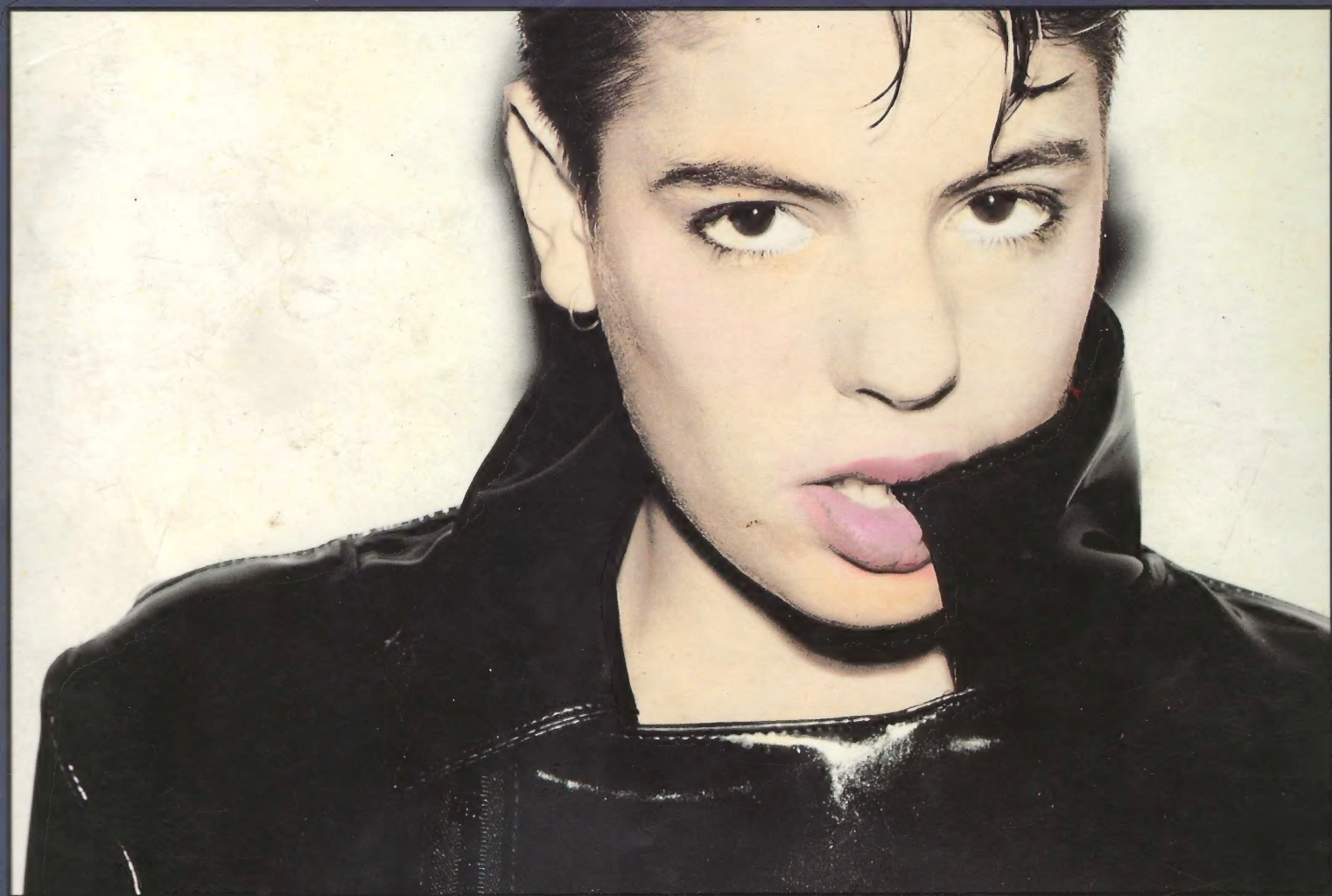


LOVE BITES



photographs by

DELLA GRACE

LOVE BITES

Dedicated to Sylvia Elizabeth MacFarlane in love and lust.

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Harnessed 1989

Della Grace : Photos on the margin of the Lesbian Community

In a culture that condemns the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and elevates that of Norman Rockwell and Lord Litchfield, any disenfranchised group of people must struggle for the simple right of affirmative existence. In this process each community must establish its own criteria for determining what makes a work of art useful to its larger vision of freedom. The current anti-pornography laws and pervasive anti-sex moralism have been used to declare entire lives obscene. We are no longer looking at a separation of particular acts as forbidden, but now face a growing cultural acceptance that people's *lives* are pornographic. The mere assertion by invisible and repressed peoples that they live, love and feel requires a continued courage and arrogance.

However, no state of being is inherently radical, critical or makes a contribution to the necessary transformation process that must confront our unfree society. Artwork requires more than a stance. There must be an investigation, an insight and a revelation. The artist must offer us something that has been learned in order for work to be emotionally resonant. This is a particularly difficult challenge to a visual artist who is already burdened by the obstacle of using subjects who are considered, in and of themselves, deviant. Della Grace, an American-born photographer living in London and working throughout Britain and the US, has developed a broad portfolio of portraits of lesbians from the punk, leather, S&M and bar communities. Throughout she highlights many of the complicated questions inherent in their representations.

In 1988, Spectrum's "Women's" Photography Month at The Young Unknowns Gallery included a group show entitled "The Lesbian Gaze". Here, Della exhibited samples from a series called "The Ceremony". Each photo depicted the same two young women in their early twenties, at what appears to be their wedding ceremony. The sequence mirrors the kind of typical family photos, sure to be placed later in a plastic-covered souvenir album. The groom is topless with a leather harness, wristband, a studded belt and leather cap with inlaid brim. Her head is shaved. The bride wears long, formal rubber gloves with wristbands matching her betrothed's belt. She is dressed in a bodice, double earrings and lipstick with a delicate white wedding veil over streaked blond hair. The surrounding atmosphere is joyous. In many of the photos the women are in movement, shot outside, on a grassy hill overlooking a tree-lined section of London. All their gestures indicate happiness, fun, freedom and bravado. This is the most compelling aspect of the work – the daring with which the women recuperate the most sacred heterosexual ritual and do it topless, outside and in leather.

This series is among Della's finest work and reveals an intimacy between subjects, and between subject, photographer and viewer because we are all included in the family celebrating this statement of desirous love. At no time is there any indication that these are stigmatised people at a forbidden event. Their joy overcomes that shadow. With or without their tattoos these two are revealed, vulnerable and sexual.

In the final photo, a parody of all wedding portraits, the sleepily satiated groom holds onto her lover with an expression of sexual contentment. She knows what she's got in her arms and she is satisfied. The bride dares us to acknowledge her sexual power and her choice of lover. It is a portrait of unity, desire and erotic polarity; a simple beauty masterfully achieved by the photographer.

Looking at Della's photos we know immediately who her subjects are by their hair styles, clothing choices, body poses and environments. Ornamentation is the crucial identifier in this work and creates a multiple level of exposure for the artist to explore. Because under every chain, leather cap and dog collar there is a woman with a history and with feelings, these two dynamics – style and content – interact to create the tension necessary for a fully successful piece of artwork.

There is a tendency to want to judge Della's photos by whether or not they are erotic because the subjects belong to sexually defined communities. But that places a narrow and unfair burden on the photographs. Della Grace has been part of these communities. She is not an anthropologist or an academic documentarian, and her content is far more complicated than a simple turn-on. She can show people being awkward, silly, sexually charged or placid, thereby expanding the totality of their humanity within the limits of photography.

Some of the images seem designed for outsiders. They include potentially scandalous S&M scenes with tough looking Butches and slutty Femmes. The photos are shot inside, referring to cellars, garages and other secret places where rough sex is hidden and contained. Some of the photos appear to refer to historically recognised acts of violence. But Della injects a sense of humour into the seamy side of things. In one photo a group sex scene is taking place. A blond woman in a rubber dress is on her knees being held down by two other women in more masculine attire. One is fucking the blonde from behind with a dildo while the other holds her in place. On first view the image evoked a gang rape to me. I saw the blond woman being restrained, her mouth swollen and open as though she had been beaten about the face. But then I noticed that the rapist is wearing nail polish. The accomplice is smiling rather tenderly. This dimension actually made the photo even more disconcerting because it can no longer be pegged as a direct comment on the classic

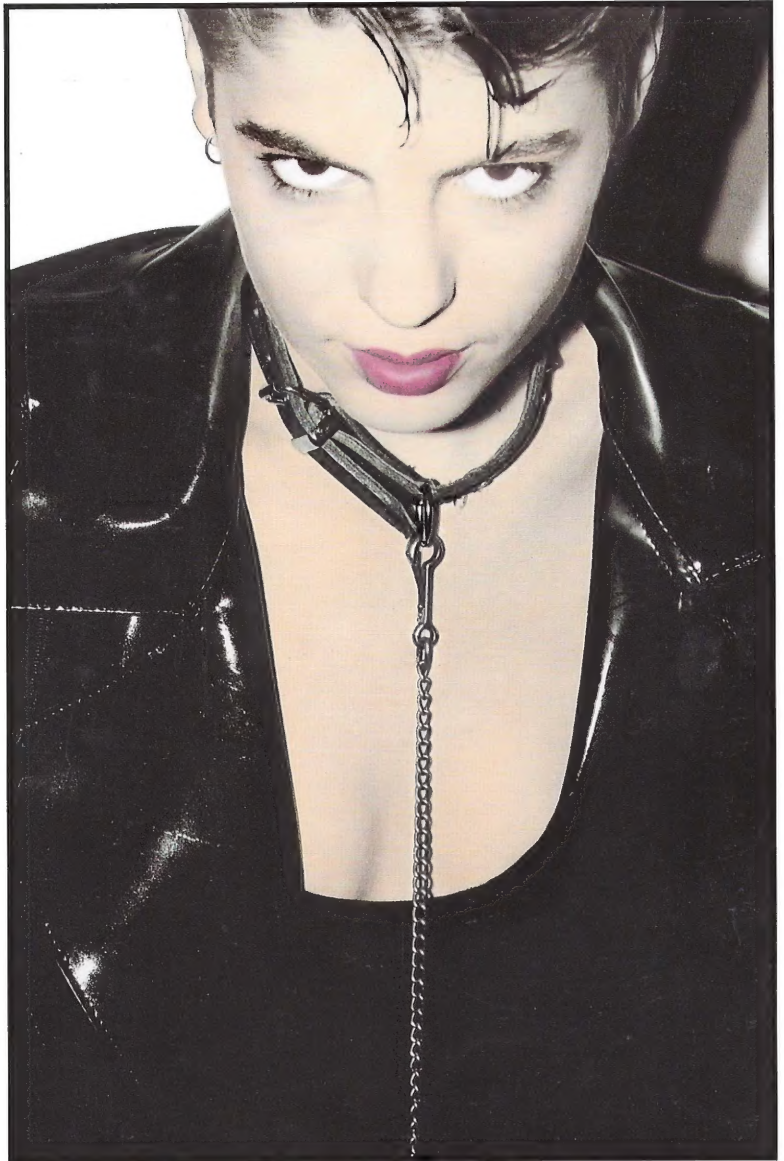
images of male violence. I felt some confusion as to the authenticity of the event I was voyeurizing. The photo gives "contradictory" clues as to what is "really" going on. Is it a "real" scene or a fabricated one? I assume it is not a "real" rape, but is this "real" sex? The difference, in this case, being determined by whether or not we are seeing an actual sex act in progress or simply a non-sexual and therefore deceptive, recreation. Are these girls wet, or what?

In another photo we see two of the three participants posing for a portrait. Like early 20th century formal poses, their positioning and relationship to the camera are gender-role prescribed. The femme is standing behind the butch. Her gloved hands dangle in a protective, typically feminine, gesture around her partner's shoulders. She has a sleepy, just-rolled-out-of-bed look and catches the camera with half-reluctant engagement. More important is her sexual positioning with regard to the butch. She holds her partner's head to her breasts. She lays claim. It is a stance of honor, respect and sexual possession. The butch sits in front of her, legs spread to reveal her large, leather encased dildo. Her muscles are tensed in a masculine pose and she avoids the camera altogether. Around her neck is a lock and chain, on her right arm is a deep, long scar. The scar is real. The sexuality is real. The desire is real and the relationship with the photographer is real. Della Grace documents, humanises, but never sanitises the women who make up her world and her sexual imagination.

Sarah Schulman, New York 1990

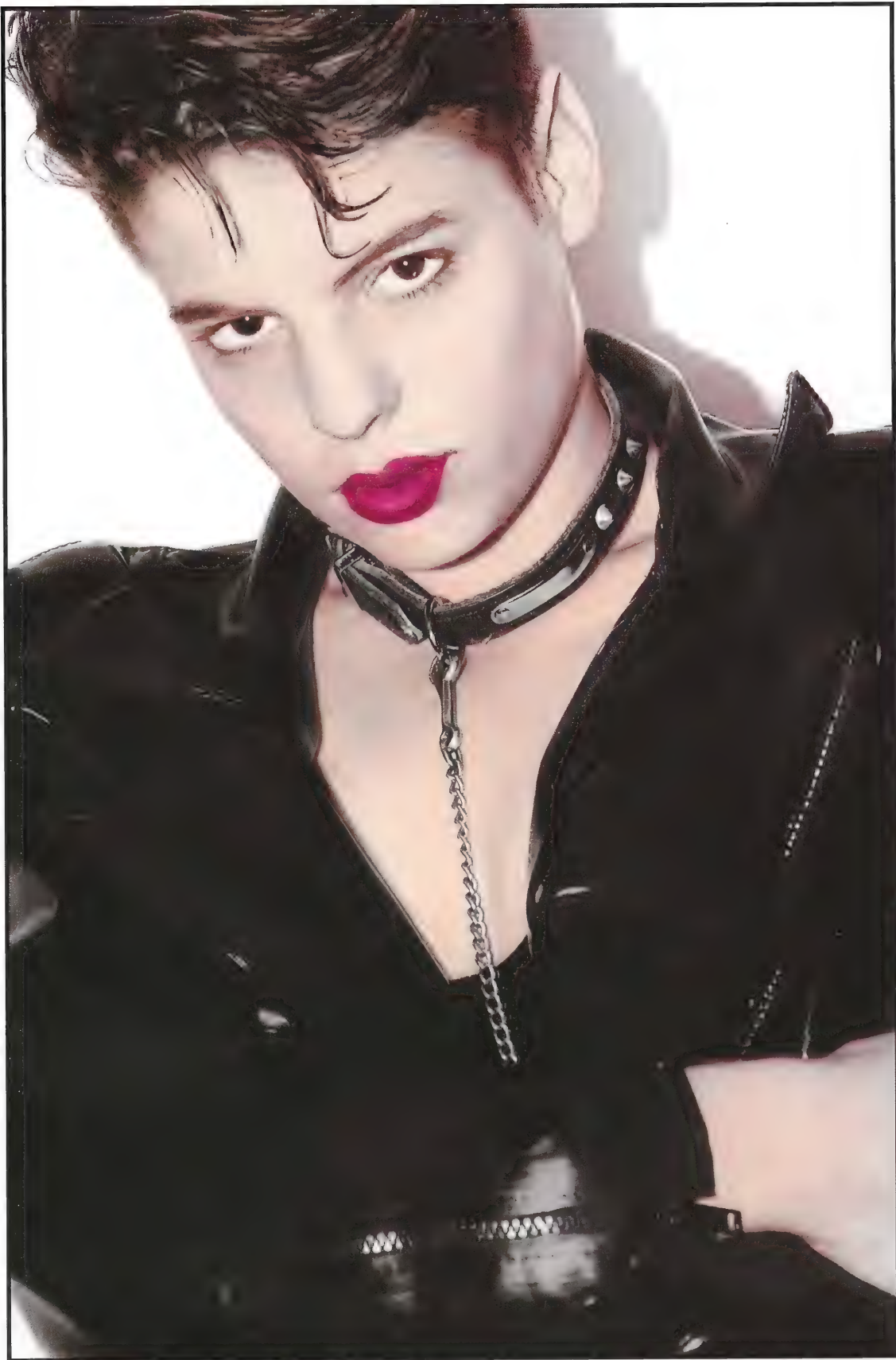
Sarah Schulman is the author of five novels, *People in Trouble*, *After Delores*, *Girls*, *Visions and Everything*, *The Sophie Horowitz Story* and *Empathy*. She is published in Britain by Sheba Press.

POSERS



Jess 1989







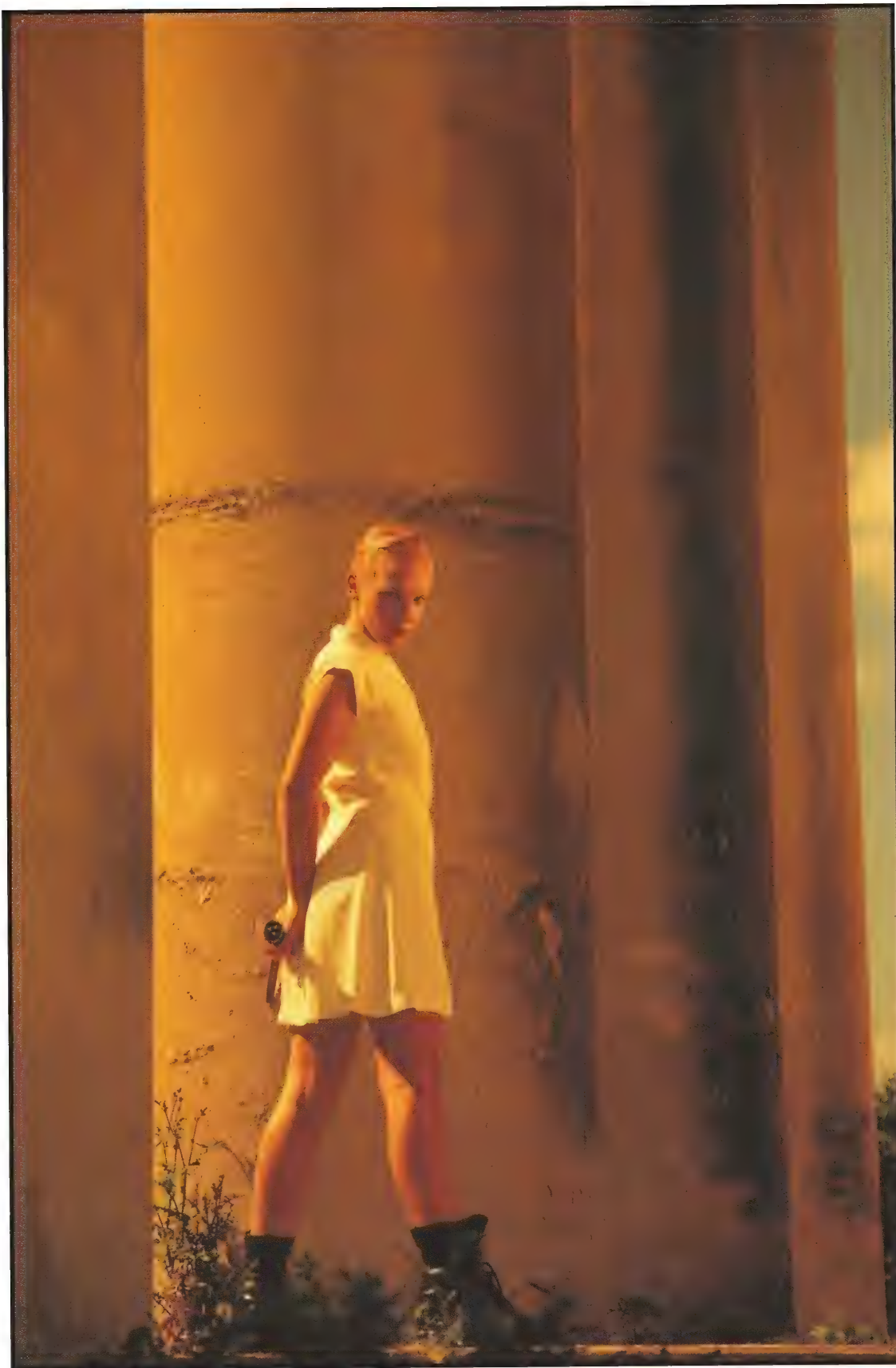






Soho Sister 1989





Ruth II 1990

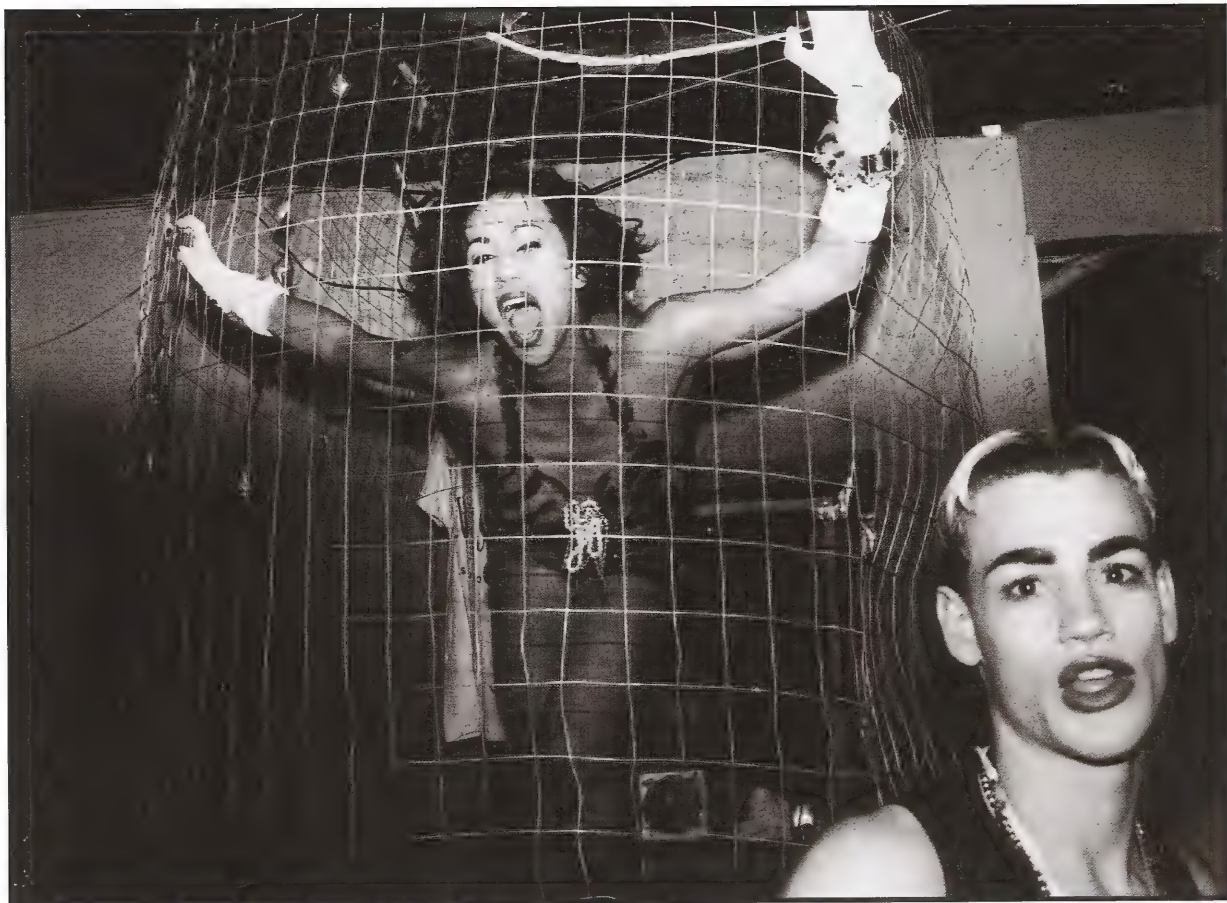
CLUBBERS



The Bell, London 1981











Issy and Beccy 1988



Jane, Jane, Queen of Pain 1987





Leslie and Billy, Venus Rising 1988





Jess and Ashleigh, Venus Rising 1989

THE LOVERS



Scott's Bar, San Francisco 1982



Scott's Bar, San Francisco 1982



Scott's Bar, San Francisco 1982

PERMISSION TO PLAY











Kitchoo and Sarah 1989



Lesbarados 1989



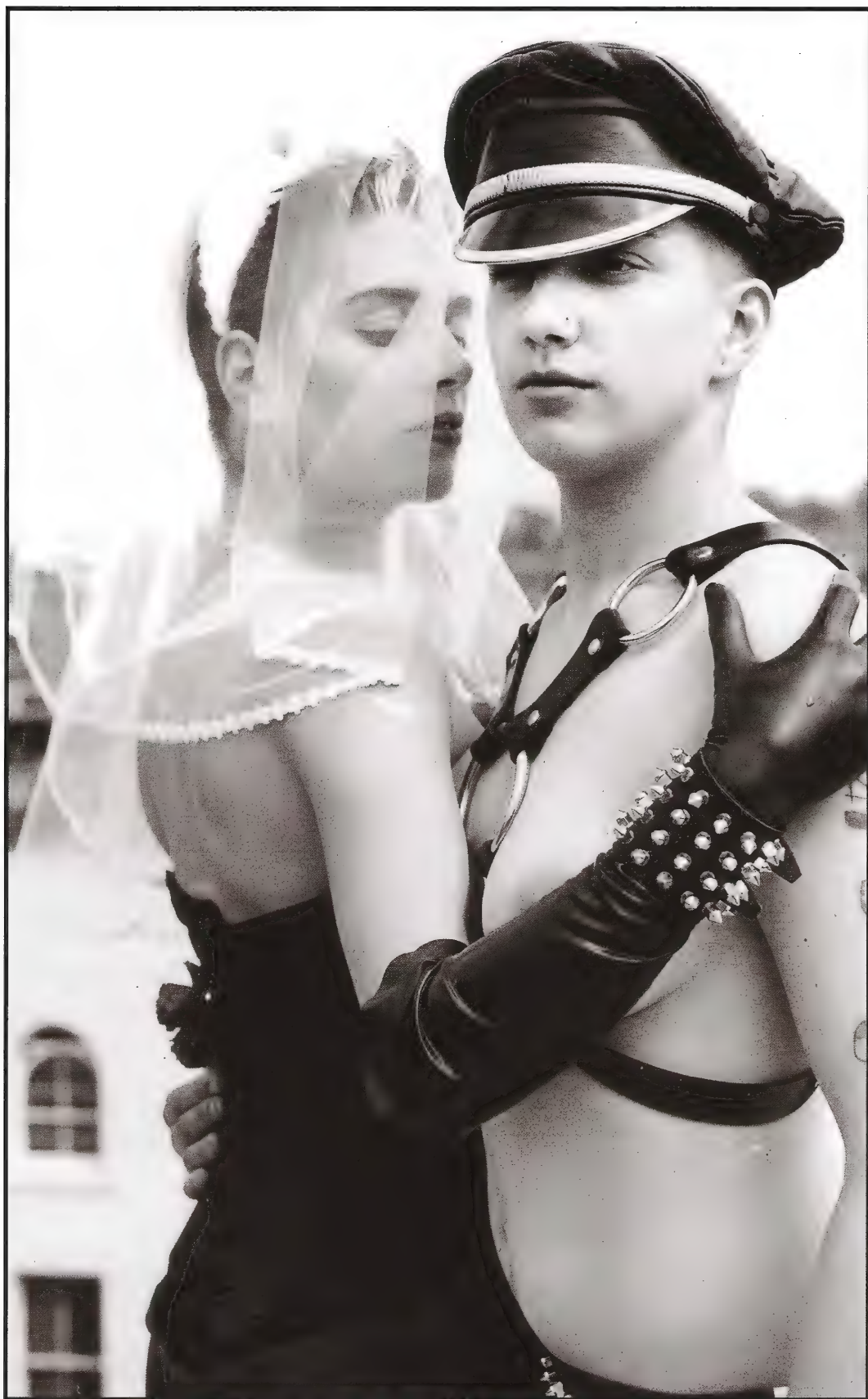




THE CEREMONY



The Ceremony 1968













RUFF SEX



Romantic Bone 1988









Be My Bitch 1988

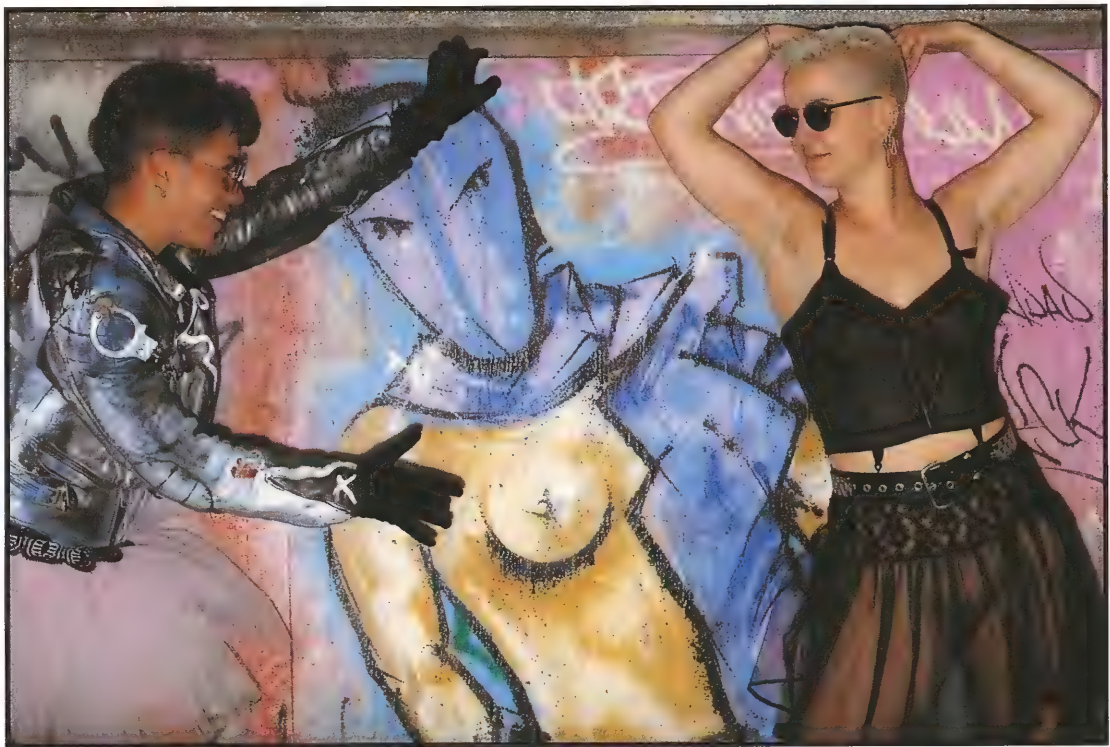
COLD-STORE ROMANCE







Robyn and Angie 1988







MARCHERS





Juggernaut Float, San Francisco Gay Freedom Parade 1990





Stop the Clause March, London 1988









Repose 1982



*Sylvia and Della at Venus Rising
photo © Eve Humphries 1989*

cover photo: Jess 1989

Della Grace, born 1957, has been involved with art and photography since the mid-70's. She has shown her work on both West and East coasts, USA and extensively in Britain. Many of her striking images have been taken up by Lesbian and Gay publications.

DELLA GRACE

supreme out dyke art photographer focusses on the
Lesbian underground communities of which she is a part



clubbing to marching
harness to tutu
ruff sex to romance
Della Grace shoots it all

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PHOTOGRAPHY

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